

Shaping the uncertainty. Revealing implicitness in ordinary practices

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# A NARRATIVE OF URBAN RECYCLE



**WATER**SHEDS

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**SANDU**



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## SHAPING THE UNCERTAINTY

### Revealing implicitness in ordinary practices

*Mauro Berta*

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*Watersheds* is a research basically aimed to retrace and to make comparable some complex urban transformation processes – in very different cultural and social contexts, like Italy and China – by representing them through a shared graphic formalism, trying to investigate not only the mere results of these transformations, but most of all the multiple relations among their physical effects and the whole of material and immaterial conditions preceding them, such as political decisions, public debates, technical documents etc.

The underlying research question of this work is quite simple: is there – within the ordinary practices – any system of implicit correlations and interdependences eluding the canonical narratives, but which could foster – if they were made explicit – a better understanding of the transformations themselves? And if yes, how could it be represented and used in order to improve a better awareness of the design process? As it has been said, the four cases share programmatically a common condition, which is a substantial lack of any overall architectural vision, leading the transformation. The redevelopments of Lizhiwan, Kai Tak, Sangone and Piave rivers, namely, are neither the outcomes of any linear top-down processes, nor the fulfillment of any ideal design concepts, but they are rather the complex – and somehow unpredictable – results of a superposition of a large number of self-ruling events, documents, circumscribed rationales and partial material effects, sometimes opposite and spread over long-term periods.

Trying to retrace such a geography is a challenging task, most of all because it needs to combine in a unique interpretation a number of variables in some way incommensurable, like – for instance – intangible events (discussions, regulations, deeds etc.) and their concrete effects (evacuations, land reclamations, new buildings etc.) whose placement in space and time, furthermore, is sometimes exactly defined but often blurred and vague. The diagrams of *Watersheds*, in other words, aim to gather physical space, people, policies and procedures in a synoptic visualization, in order to spatialize the political dimension of the design processes within an unconventional narrative of the urban transformations: a work having a precise cultural background.

### Mapping history. Some milestones of visual representation in the scientific culture

Data maps, which means the graphical representation of storylines and abstract information, are basically a product of modernity. As Edward Tufte explained in his studies, though cartography has deep roots in antiquity, it is only during the 17<sup>th</sup> century that the skills of geographers and historians (and – thereafter – physicists, naturalists, physicians etc.) began to converge in some brand new forms of representation (Tufte, 2001), matching the concrete dimension of the physical world with the immateriality of chronicles and statistics, and giving history and natural sciences a new intuitive guise.

Some early attempts had actually already been made during the late Renaissance period – like, for instance, Mercator's *Chronologia* (Mercator, 1569) – but those first examples were still nothing more than simple table charts, trying to harmonize the different measures of time and history, coming from the traditional sources (Brotton, 2012).

The real meeting point among scientific storytelling and visual representations could be actually found between mid-18<sup>th</sup> and mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when two different approaches – a more abstract one and a more physical one – were developed independently.

A forerunner of the first type is the early work of Joseph Priestley, whose *Chart of Biography* (1765) and *New Chart of History* (1769) became an essential epoch-making reference. 'Priestley-style' (Rosenberg, Grafton, 2010) diagrams, conceived within the framework of the Empiricist theory, had a wide influence in the following visual culture, creating a new branch of works: some of which more pictorial – like F. Strass' *Strom der Zeiten* (1804) – or even naïf, like the impressive S. C. Adams' Synchronological Chart (1881):

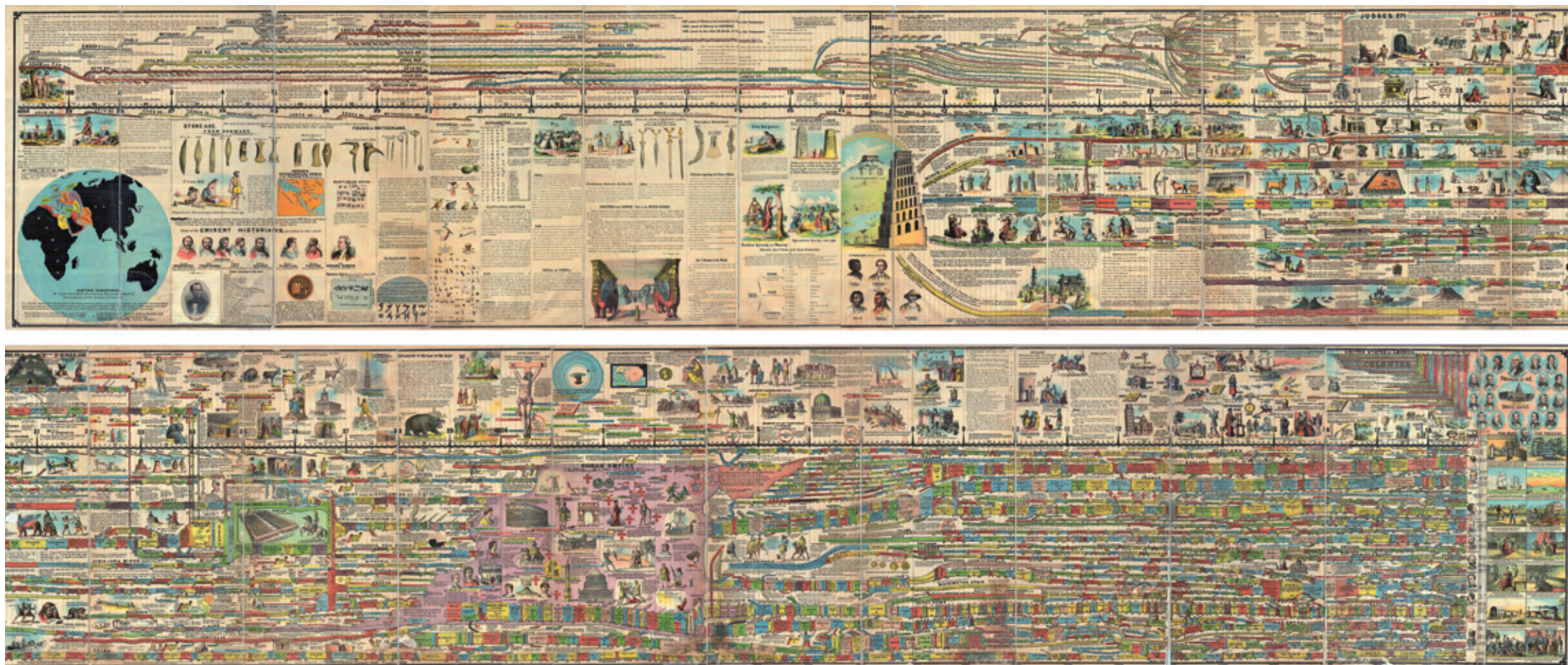
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(1804). Friedrich Strass, *Der Strom der Zeiten*





(1881). Sebastian C. Adams. *Synchronological Chart or Map of History*. New York: Colby & Co.

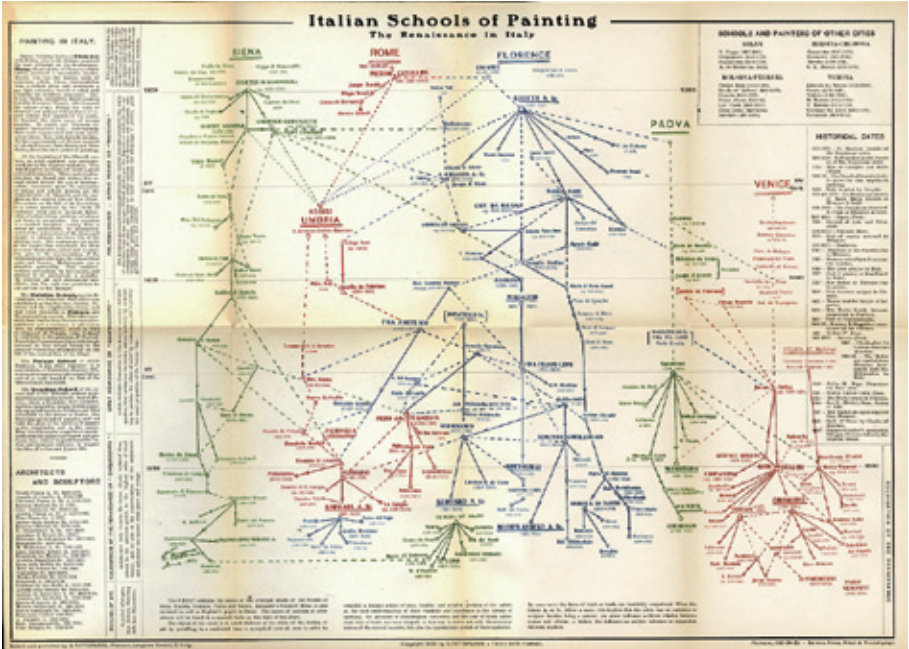




That is the case of the medical mapping, appeared in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The pioneering study of John Snow about the 1854 cholera epidemics of Broad Street in London introduced for the first time the disease cartography to circumscribe and identify the source of infection; in the same period – in the aftermath of the Crimean war – the famous nurse Florence Nightingale used abstract and eye-catching visualizations to persuade the members of Parliament to improve the sanitary conditions of the troops, by showing that – in the Army engaged in the East – the mortality for preventable diseases was much higher than the one for wounds (*Mortality of the British Army*, 1858).

But one of the most interesting uses of visual representation as an instrument to foster and steer a political debate is represented by the work on conspiracies representation made by the American conceptual artist Mark Lombardi whose *Narrative Structures* (1990s) – strongly influenced by the critique of Capitalism by H. Marcuse (Burke, Tierney, 2007) – analyzed the complex geographies of some international scandals of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, retracing – with a node and link graphic style – the untold rapports among politics, companies, banks, wars etc.

Lombardi's graphs represent definitely – from a methodological point of view – one of the nearest approaches to *Watersheds*' visualizations, not only because the graphic formalism is quite similar, but most of all because both of them share the same attempt of reducing different streams of events and groups of actors into a unique interpretative structure, whose aim is to influence the process itself.



(1930). Giovanni Fattorusso, *Italian Schools of Painting*

**What do *Watersheds*' diagrams show?**

The four charts presented in the research prove, first of all, the non-linear nature of the urban transformation processes, revealing the real margins of negotiation – sometimes very narrow – of the supposed decision-makers, and measuring the effectiveness of the project strategies.

Like the former storyline charts, they have an overall synoptic nature, allowing to understand at a glance the whole extension of complex facts, helping to take a critic distance from the objects of study.

Like Lombardi's charts, however, they are based on a nested structure. Every node of the chart could hold potentially entire subsystems of events and subjects, which could be expanded as needed, to deepen the study and to investigate single facts or chains of events.

For this reason the charts are not a static and neutral representation of reality, but they are a dynamic and slanted one, allowing to make selections among facts and interpretations, to explore possible correlations and to create a critical interpretation of the events.

Finally this kind of approach allows to find and highlight some unexpected recurring events – or, specularly, some unpredictable differences in apparently similar situations – which could be studied not only to better understand the past transformation processes, but also to steer and improve the future ones. This is likely one of the most promising outcomes of the research.

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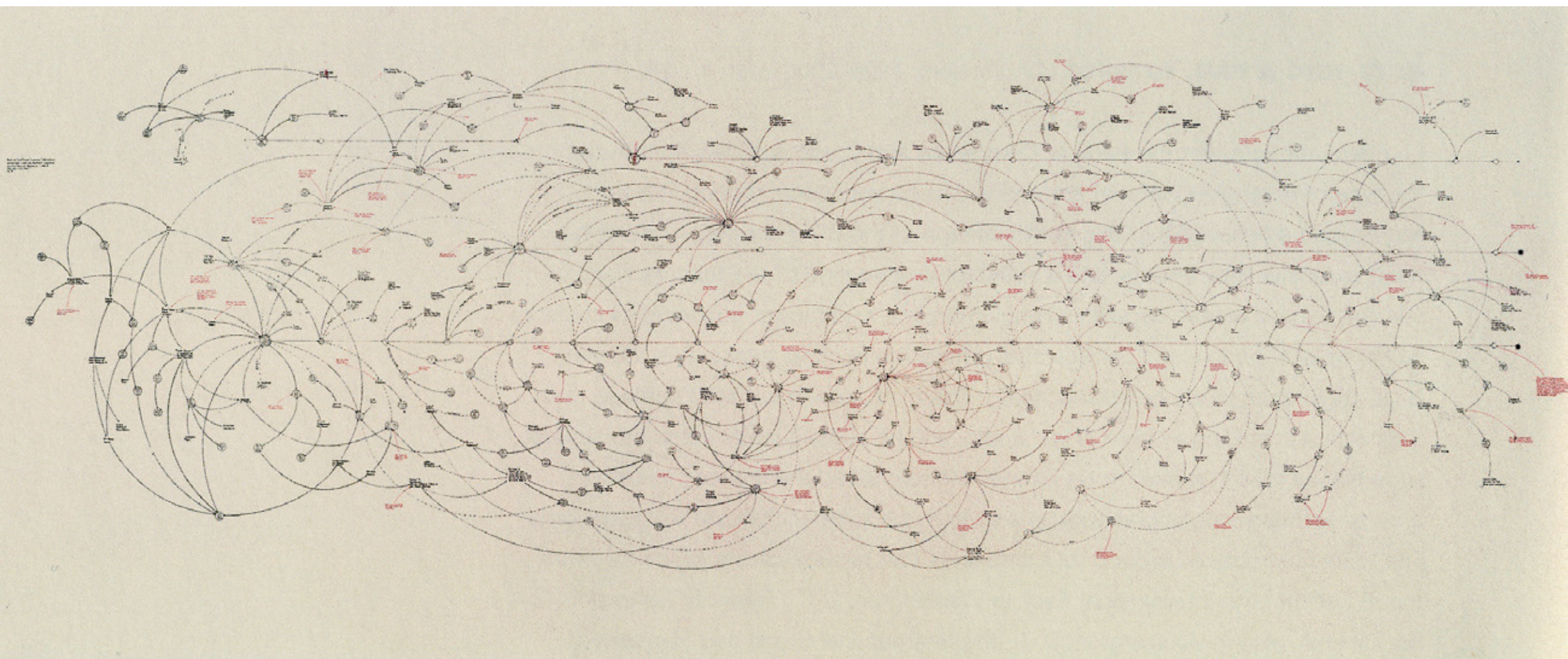
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